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## Ethnography as a research-support discipline in ESP teaching, learning and research in the French academic context

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- 1 Intersections are at the very core of our discipline since, by its very nature, ESP is an intrinsically interdisciplinary field in which language and subject-domain are symbiotically joined at the hip. As such, any taxonomic approach to ESP is largely organized according to adjunct subject-domains, as reflected in the middle letter variances of the alphabet soup so characteristic of the discipline: ELP, EMP, EST, EBP, EAP, EOP, EBP, EEXP, etc., not to mention a recent arrival, ERPP.<sup>1</sup> However, beneath the primary interdisciplinary intersections which define – and fragment – ESP, there run the deep waters of other disciplines which interact with ESP studies to enrich both teaching and research. Ethnography and corpus linguistics are two characteristic examples of ESP research support disciplines. But while corpus linguistics focuses on text-analysis through computational data, ethnography focuses on the users of the language and the context of use, i.e., the sociocultural dimension of the target professional or specialised environment. Far from being exclusionary, the measurement-driven quantitative approach and the sociocultural qualitative approach combine to provide a more complete picture of language use in context. Needs analysis, the traditional cornerstone of the discipline, is a testimony to the symbiotic link between quantitative and qualitative data in ESP research: if computational data is invaluable in analysing the specific linguistic features of the specialised language in question, identifying the multiple facets of its use in target contexts is best obtained through an ethnographic-driven approach of O&A (observation and analysis) *in situ*.
- 2 A recent article by Dressen-Hammouda (2013: 508) identifies a growing interest for ethnography in ESP research as evidenced by bibliometric analysis of ethnographic-inspired or “qualitative” research articles published in three central ESP research

journals. A comparative approach with regard to the past decade of publications in *ASp*, the French journal of ESP studies, reveals that, although subjects lending to an ethnographic approach are discussed, few make reference to an ethnographic or qualitative approach.

- 3 And yet, ethnography is a natural ally of ESP studies which adopt a wide-angled, sociocultural approach (Belcher 2004) in keeping with Parkinson's concentric circles illustrating "the expanding focus of ESP" (2013: 155). Without minimizing the importance of specific lexis and phraseology in ESP teaching and research, French ESP scholars tend to be wary of a reductive interpretation of the "S" in ESP and its implied restricted focus on specialised lexis, preferring a wide-angled sociocultural approach construed in terms of the cornerstone triangulation of language, discourse and culture fundamental to "*anglais de spécialité*", as defined by Petit:

[L'anglais de spécialité est] est la branche de l'anglistique qui traite de la *langue*, du *discours* et de la *culture* des communautés professionnelles et groupes sociaux spécialisés anglophones et de l'enseignement de cet objet (2002: 2-3).<sup>2</sup> (Emphases added)

- 4 Given the broad sociocultural ESP objectives that the French academic sector promotes, and in spite of unpromising bibliometric evidence, we posit that there is a discernible underlying link between ethnography and ESP teaching and research in France.

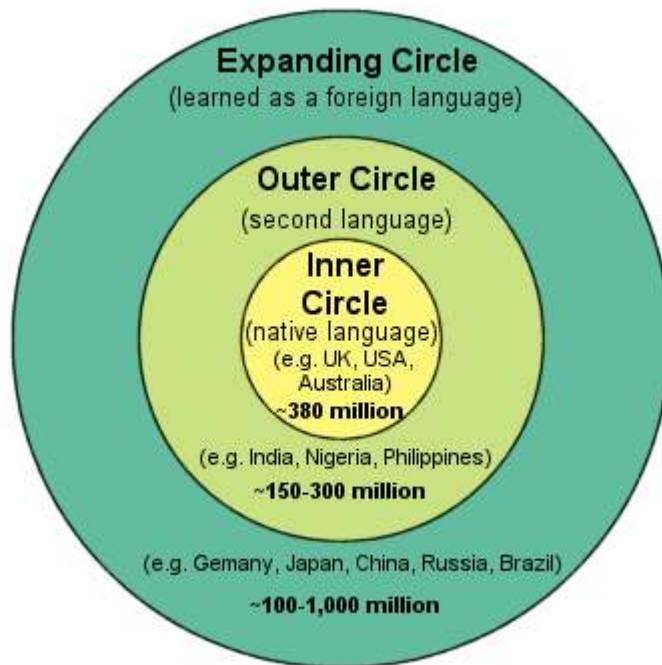
## Ethnography: a brief overview

- 5 Ethnography, like its parent discipline, cultural (US) or social (UK) anthropology, is often a misrepresented discipline amongst ESP scholars as indicated by the recent remark of one prominent ESP specialist who professed he failed to see the link between ESP and a discipline that studied "primitive peoples". Such misconceptions die hard, in spite of the fact that general public and specialised sources concur to the contrary:
- 6 Today the field extends to all forms of human association, from village communities to *corporate cultures* to urban gangs. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Concise* online). Italics added.
- 7 [t]he scientific study and recording of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits and mutual differences. (Oxford English Dictionary online). Italics added.
- 8 Ethnography is the long-term, holistic, intensive study of people's behaviour in ongoing settings (typically communities), a central aim of which is *to understand the social organization and culturally-based perspectives and interpretations that underlie knowledge and guide behaviour in a given social group*. (Watson-Gegeo 1997: 136). Italics added.
- 9 Ethnographic methodology may be summed up in terms of Geertz's (1973) "thick description" and its focus on empirical data collection through human observation and experiential immersion in the context under study. Some of the "tools" which define the heuristics of the discipline are O&A through participant observation *in situ*, multiple-source recorded data collection through questionnaires and interviews documented through "field notes", and compilation of data for scientific reporting according to emic (insider) or etic (outsider) viewpoints. To this may be added a fourth component which involves cross-cultural comparison, as the OED definition implies when referring to "mutual differences". Though it is a moot point according to different schools of ethnography (Heath & Street 2008), cross-cultural analysis is not

without relevance to ESP studies and the constant pendulum swing between source and target professional cultures.

- 10 Though the ethnographic approach is now widely used for data collection purposes in many social science disciplines, it has its flaws. One issue, for example, bears on the inevitable self-reflexivity of such intrusive factors as underlying sympathy, ideology, ethnocentrism, etc., and the resulting risk of observer bias (Roberts *et al.* 2001: 89-90; Hegelund 2005). Another concerns what William Labov (1972) identified as “the Observer’s Paradox” and relates to the researcher’s “participant” status which necessarily affects communication and results obtained, as his experiments in relation to obtaining “natural” language production highlighted (also see Bourdieu 1977).
- 11 Given such reservations and also taking into consideration the practical complications of *in situ* immersion, the question arises as to the added-value of such an undertaking or, as Thoreau so famously said in 1854, “Is it worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar?”. Can quantitative data not suffice? The answer, of course, depends on whether the central focus is on text alone or on the context, community and communication parameters which govern its production and reception. To pursue the metaphor, if our objective is to carry out a census of the cat population of Zanzibar, computational methods of research should suffice, dispensing with all need to go to Zanzibar. On the other hand, if the aim is to study the meowing of the said cats, variations according to habitat and behaviour and the effects produced on the receptor’s habitat and behaviour, then a journey to Zanzibar for *in situ* O&A would certainly appear to be worth undertaking. In terms of our discipline, if the purpose is to focus on text-linguistics from a lexico-grammatical perspective, a machine-mediated *in vitro* approach suffices adequately; if, on the other hand, the purpose is to study language as a form of human interaction in all the complexity of its context of situation, the *in vivo* approach practiced by ethnographers certainly allows for deeper insights and a fuller picture.
- 12 Having, we hope, shown the value of an ethnographic-driven approach in relation to language studies, we now propose to analyse the multiple ways in which ethnography intersects with ESP as practised in a large number of French university contexts. But first, given the global dimension of the discipline, it is important to establish as a preamble the fundamental distinction between English-speaking (endolingual) and non-English-speaking (exolingual) learning contexts<sup>3</sup> described in the framework of Kachru’s (1985) inner, outer and expanding circles, as revisited by the following graphic from *The History of English* site:

Fig. 1. Kachru's (1985) three circles of English around the world



Source: <[http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/history\\_today.html](http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/history_today.html)>, consulted 26/2/14

- 13 The endo-/exolingual factor is an important variable with regard to ESP-driven *in situ* immersion, it being obvious that target situation immersion (*in situ* O&A) is admittedly more difficult in exolingual learning environments (Kachru's expanding circles) than it is endolingual ones (Kachru's inner and outer circles). Despite such obstacles, we hope to demonstrate that ethnography is a present if latent contributing science in ESP studies in the framework of the wide-angled, sociocultural approach largely practised in French university contexts. With this objective in mind, this analysis departs from the traditional ESP classroom teacher-language-learner triangulation to focus on ESP as an academic teaching and research discipline and its three primary stakeholders, the teacher, the learner and the researcher.

## 1. Ethnography and the ESP teacher

- 14 Ethnography intersects with the ESP teacher at two<sup>4</sup> main, unrelated levels, subject-domain knowledge and the learner's learning culture.
- 15 A critical issue in ESP, and a problem familiar to ESP practitioners in both endo- and exolingual learning contexts,<sup>5</sup> is what Belcher has called "one of the most vexing issues of ESP praxis" (2013: 545), i.e., the relation between ESP teachers and learner specialisms: what must the language specialist's degree of familiarity be with the learner's field of specialisation? Although there is a certain consensus towards the requirement of a level of content area knowledge bordering that expected of the "average college-educated layman", advocates of more specialised expectations also exist (Van der Yeught 2012). The critical issue here is naturally that of subject-domain accessibility: certain subject-domains, such as economics or medicine,<sup>6</sup> belong to the sphere of public debate and/or personal experience and are consequently familiar to

many laypeople; on the other hand, the technical nature of disciplines such as physics, mechanics, computer sciences, etc., is often a serious barrier.

- 16 In spite of these considerations, it remains postulational that whatever the relative ease or difficulty of access, teaching objectives which seek to develop overall communicative competence allowing learners to function as fully-fledged members of an international discourse community, need to adopt a sociocultural perspective extending beyond the limited objectives of the “sociodiscoursal” approach (Belcher 2004). Heath & Street underline the importance of such acculturation in ESP:  
Institutions and organizations develop their own norms and genres of interactive oral and written exchange, and success in adopting these can mean the difference between membership and exclusion for individuals. The cultural patterning of interaction shapes identities and roles that then provide access and opportunities for learners. [...] Corporate groups, sports teams, and other organizations consciously build and promote their own “culture” for public relations purposes. Insiders and old-timers often judge newcomers by the extent to which they adopt certain key values or behaviors identified with “our culture”. Failure to act as a member in “good” cultural standing can, and often does, lead to ostracism or expulsion. (2008: 6-10)
- 17 In light of such high stakes, it is clear that, in addition to the specific language of the specialised domain, ESP teachers also need to transmit the cultural fundamentals of the specialised environment in which this language is used, i.e., “the context of situation” Malinowski evoked in 1923. This in turn raises the question of how to gain access to the less-codified area of specialised culture with little or no opportunity to study it *in situ*, as is the case in the exolingual environments of Kachru’s expanding circles.
- 18 In the absence of formal ethnographic-driven training programmes aiming to familiarise teachers and researchers with the specialised environment of learner specialisms, most ESP teachers practising in the French university context – and elsewhere – acquire their knowledge through serendipity or personal effort and, regrettably, seldom through formal “parallel induction” as recommended by Boswood and Marriott (1994). Despite which, such knowledge does exist, albeit at varying levels: some ESP teachers are dual-specialists (law + language, physics + language, computer sciences + language), while others gain their knowledge through on-the-job exposure to “the community of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1991). Still others invest in a more academic approach by consulting existing research. In view of such disparate approaches, it is clear that *in situ* immersion and O&A would certainly provide a more scientific approach to bettering ESP teachers’ knowledge of the specialised environment of the subject-domain.
- 19 The second intersecting point between ESP teachers and ethnography concerns the teacher-learner nexus first highlighted by the well-documented (Hutchinson & Waters 1987) epistemological shift in focus from the teacher-centred to the learner-centred approach and from target situation analysis (TSA) to present situation analysis (PSA).
- 20 Given today’s culturally diverse learning environments, the teacher-learner nexus has shifted again to include focus on the learner’s culture of learning, it being clear that an Asian, Confucian-heritage, teacher-centred learning culture, for example, will be at marked variance with a learner-centred, interactive approach.
- 21 In this respect, it must be recognised that French ESP teachers still have some way to go, the main explanation being that ESP courses in French university environments have tended to be situated in a context of a shared teacher-learner learning culture.

Nonetheless, a significant transition is underway in European universities where increasing cultural diversity entails co-existence of diversified learning cultures within the same group. While there is a substantial body of ethnography-driven research on this question – in France, notably with reference to FFL –,<sup>7</sup> it mainly concerns culturally homogeneous groups. Given the increasingly composite nature of learning cultures in today's exolingual ESP learning environments, there is a clear need for classroom ethnography as defined below:

In contrast to quantitative approaches to classroom research, classroom ethnography emphasizes *the sociocultural nature* of teaching and learning processes, incorporates *participants' perspectives on their own behaviour*, and offers a holistic analysis sensitive to *levels of context* in which interactions and classrooms are situated. (Watson-Gegeo 1997: 135). Italics added.

- 22 It is unfortunate that though classroom ethnography has long been used by researchers in the field of language sciences and “*didactique des langues*” in France and French-speaking environments, it has yet to become a dynamic line of enquiry in the field of ESP.

## 2. Ethnography and the ESP learner

- 23 Conscious of the simulated nature of classroom environments, teachers generally borrow from the situated practices of the sociocultural approach and expose pupils and students to the “real” world through site visits, encounters with professionals, study trips, etc. A variation on the theme is the “classes on-site” strategy (Belcher 2004: 172-173) which calls for teachers in endolingual environments holding classes for law students in courthouses, for medical students in hospitals, etc. Though far removed from Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of “situated learning” within “the community of practice”, such practices are nevertheless pedagogically enriching experiences. The caveat, however, is that such facilities are scarce in the exolingual learning environments of Kachru's expanding circles, it being difficult to expose indigenous ESP learners to target professional settings in source learning contexts.
- 24 This drawback has, to a considerable extent, been remedied in European university contexts through student mobility programmes, university exchange programmes, such as ERASMUS, and extended internships abroad.
- 25 ERASMUS-type exchange programmes, based on one to two semesters spent in a university abroad, are seldom considered as potential for ethnographic-driven experiences as students are required to comply with pre-agreed curriculum and credit requirements. Consequently, though immersion in a foreign culture is never devoid of interest, “simply spending a period abroad may not create significant changes in competence, understanding or ways of thinking. An intellectually rigorous and personally challenging set of goals is needed for this period of learning away from the home institution” (Roberts *et al.* 2001: 32).
- 26 In contrast, and from a more professionalising viewpoint, there is a widespread practice in France of compulsory extended internships abroad (two to six months to one year) at undergraduate and graduate levels. Similar to “mini-ethnographies” described by Ann M. Johns (1997) in the context of EAP, these internships, organised according to learners' L2 or L3 choices and their future “community of practice”, may



certainly be developed into ethnographic experiences since interns, immersed in the target professional environment, are required to carry out O&A and critical reporting.

- 27 In the context of this type of student mobility, much is to be learned from the avant-garde European-funded Ealing Ethnography Project<sup>8</sup> developed in the 1990s at Thames Valley University. The aim was to provide basic grounding in ethnography to language specialists who, Roberts *et al.* argue, “are best placed to develop the language learner as ethnographer” (2001: 35). Language specialists, in turn, initiate university students on how to analyse and conceptualise their experience abroad through the prism of an ethnographic perspective:

The project is typical of what a languages student can achieve during their period of residence abroad. [sic] There is no intention that the students of modern languages should be turned into anthropologists or even professional ethnographers. The idea is that they can acquire some theoretical concepts and ethnographic skills so that they are able to understand the local cultural practices sufficiently to write an ethnographic project, rather than undertake a full-scale ethnography. [...] We argue that language teachers and students can use ethnography to develop their cultural learning in general, and their capacity to mediate between different cultural groups in particular. Thus, the purpose of ethnography in this context is to integrate language and cultural processes. (Roberts *et al.* 2001: 11-12). *Italics added.*

- 28 In this perspective, an ethnographic-inspired approach stands to gain by borrowing from related research areas. One example is the work of such cultural anthropologists as Edward T. Hall, Mildred Hall, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaar, etc., and the analysis tools and insights they provide to apprehending the amorphous and protean notion of “culture”, whether that of a specialised discourse community or the general culture to which it is related. A number of French universities and master’s programmes have introduced courses designed to prepare students “culturally” for their internships abroad (Carnet, Charpy *et al.* 2004), but there is still much potential to be gained in terms of intellectual, linguistic and cultural development by generalising a more informed approach based on the principles, practices and tools of ethnography.

### 3. Ethnography and the ESP researcher

- 29 ESP research in France is formally defined in terms of four epistemological axes, language, didactics, culture, and ICT. According to figures published in a special issue commemorating the 30th anniversary of GERAS<sup>9</sup> and its journal, *ASp* (Mémet & Van der Yeught 2008), 42% of the articles published concern linguistics, 42% teaching/learning practices, and 16% culture and “civilisation”. Even though such bibliometric figures cannot account adequately for transversal research-support disciplines as ethnography, they clearly highlight the traditional predominance of the teaching-based, language-centred approach of ESP studies in France (and elsewhere), and the overdue epistemological shift towards the sociocultural dimension of the discipline.
- 30 Nonetheless, a closer look reveals at least two ELP<sup>10</sup> teaching-related articles written in the last decade using ethnography-related principles and practices: firstly, Braud’s foray into the judicial field to gather data on how French judges perceive their needs in English (2008) and secondly, Chapon’s use of classroom ethnography practices to gauge motivational variations in relation to different types of ELP pedagogical supports (2011).



- 31 A more innovative form of ethnographic-driven research is to be seen in an epistemological shift away from ESP's traditional focus on teaching towards a research-orientated interest in specialised communities in and for themselves, an approach which steers ESP studies away from applied research to fundamental research. Foregrounded by Vijay Bhatia in 2004, the corresponding shift in French ESP research foci is summed up by Resche's perception of the dynamics of French ESP research:

La recherche telle que nous la concevons en anglais de spécialité part du principe que les discours spécialisés, produits par des communautés spécialisées, constituent une porte d'entrée conduisant à la découverte des milieux spécialisés, de leurs coutumes, normes et contraintes, et, pour ce qui est d'une discipline, de l'histoire des idées qui ont forgé un domaine spécialisé. (2013: 29)<sup>11</sup>

- 32 The focus on specialised communities as objects of research *per se*, with little explicit reference to teaching, has introduced new ethnographic-driven dynamics into the field of ESP doctoral studies. One such example is Wozniak's ground-breaking thesis on the specialised community of high mountain guides in the United States (2011) using an ethnographic-driven approach based on multiple *in situ* immersions, participant observation, multi-sourced data collection through O&A, technology-mediated and face-to-face exchanges with interactants and stakeholders (interviews, questionnaires, etc.), and scientific reporting.
- 33 Predictably, a "thick" ethnographic-inspired approach is costly and time-consuming. With regard to ESP researchers, *in situ* immersion, the cornerstone of ethnographic studies, entails significant budget and time constraints with regard to a field which is, after all, a means and not an end. Such constraints are particularly challenging for exolingual ESP researchers whose subsequent need to compromise may entail risk of underinvestment resulting in "thin description" and unsatisfactory results.
- 34 In view of this, it is worth noting, as Heath & Street point out, that there is a difference between "doing ethnography, adopting an ethnographic perspective, or using ethnographic tools" (2008: 120), and that *in situ* immersion can be modulated according to time and budget facilities. As such, ethnographic-driven projects may be carried out in:

compressed time mode" according to which "[r]esearchers inhabit a site for brief but intensive periods trying to see everything that is relevant to the participants. (Heath & Street 2008: 63)

selective intermittent time mode" in which case "[r]esearchers spend a longer period of time but use a flexible approach, selecting particular foci and events [...], dipping in and out of the research site to observe these. (*ibidem*)

recurrent time mode" which involves "a more formal division of research into temporal phases, the aim being to monitor and compare change over time. (*ibid.*)

- 35 Moreover, such *in situ* modularity can be envisaged in terms of a "focused ethnography" perspective in the framework of which "ethnographers focus on a distinct problem with a specific context among a small group of people" (Roper & Shapira 2000: 7-10), an approach not unlike the one adopted by Swales in *Textography* in which the "practices, rhythms, texts, and personalities" (1998: 141) of three university departments located in the same building are analysed:

A full ethnography by an expert ethnographer would doubtless have captured the full social and cultural complexity; a lighter textography [...] can however focus on relating context and textual surface and thus communicate something to those communities that are particularly interested in academic writing as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. (1998: 142)

- 36 An understanding of the fundamentals of an ethnographic approach as advocated in the framework of the Ealing Project discussed above, combined with the type of focused approach adopted by Swales in *Textography* (1998), offers a degree of practical and epistemological flexibility which “liberates ethnographers from the demands of the full-time anthropologist while also maintaining the goals of rigor and validity” (Heath & Street 2008: 9). Such modulations present a high degree of compatibility with ESP researchers whose primary academic focus lies elsewhere but who, nevertheless, need the rich insights afforded by experiential immersion in the culture of reference.

## Conclusion

- 37 Ethnography, as we have seen, is far from being a science that studies only “primitive peoples” through extensive immersion, as Malinowski, the father of ethnography, so famously and serendipitously did. We also realise that, given the wide-angled, sociocultural framework of ESP studies promoted in French universities, ethnography enjoys the somewhat paradoxical privilege of being a discipline that a large number of teachers, learners and researchers practise without consciously doing so: the linguistic or literary background of the majority of French ESP teachers and researchers, suddenly confronted with the dual disciplinarity of ESP, leaves them little option but to venture out into the field, untrained and untried, to glean data relevant to their learners’ subject-domains. As such, a number of French ESP teachers and researchers are already unsuspecting amateur ethnographers.
- 38 The next step is, obviously, to move from the status of unsuspecting amateurs to that of enlightened and informed amateurs. The growing interest for ethnography detected by Dressen-Hammouda (*op. cit.*) in global ESP research, combined with emerging interest for the same in the French university sector, will undoubtedly lead to a more scientifically-grounded approach through greater investment in the methodology, tools and research questions related to an approach whose contribution to gaining better understanding of language use in context cannot be overestimated.

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## NOTES

1. ERPP: English for Research and Publication Purposes
2. My translation: "English for Specialised Purposes is that branch of English studies which deals with the *language, discourse and culture* of professional communities and specialised English-speaking social groups and the teaching thereof." (Italics added)
3. "Foreign language learners could further be distinguished from each other according to the type of learning context they are in: while some foreign language learners study their target language in places where it is used for day-to-day communication (endolingual learning contexts), others learn it in places where the use of the target language is more or less restricted to the language classroom (exolingual learning contexts)." (Punchihetti 2013: online)
4. It could be argued that needs analysis, an area of ESP studies which is highly dependent on an ethnographic-related approach, also concerns the ESP teacher. However, ESP teachers are not systematically involved in all aspects of needs analysis, as indicated by the fact that target situation analysis is often carried out by course designers and researchers. We have subsequently chosen not to include this aspect in our discussion here.
5. The question of familiarity with the subject-domain environment in an exolingual learning context is more complex since the comparative approach inherent to language learning and cross-cultural issues in such contexts requires familiarity with source and target professional environments.
6. The subject-domain of law presents a rather special case in that, contrary to such transculturally stable fields of knowledge as mathematics or chemistry, the subject-domain knowledge of law is culture-specific, broadly split between common law and Romano-Germanic systems.
7. FFL: French as a Foreign Language

8. A two-and-a-half year project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (R232716): Cultural Studies in Advanced Language Learning. (Roberts *et al.* 2001: 17)
  9. GERAS: *Groupe d'étude et de recherche en anglais de spécialité*, the national French society for ESP teachers and researchers
  10. ELP: English for Legal Purposes
  11. Our translation: "As I see it, research in ESP evolves from the principle that the specialised discourse of specialised communities is a conduit to the discovery of specialised environments, their customs, norms, commitments, etc., and, in the case of disciplines, the history of ideas which led to the forging of the specialised domain."
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## ABSTRACTS

This article posits that there is a natural affinity between an ethnographic-inspired approach and ESP teaching and research in the wide-angled, sociocultural perspective prevalent in French universities. In spite of little bibliometric evidence to this effect, this study identifies an unrecognised but nevertheless discernible ethnographic-orientated current which underlines the involvement of all three central protagonists of the discipline, ESP teachers, learners and researchers. The article concludes by advocating that the sociocultural orientation of ESP teaching and research in the French academic context stands to benefit from greater integration of the principles and practices of ethnography in French ESP studies.

Cet article postule l'existence d'une affinité naturelle entre une approche inspirée de l'ethnographie et la perspective socioculturelle qui est celle de l'anglais de spécialité du secteur universitaire français. Malgré peu d'indications bibliométriques à cet effet, cette analyse se donne comme objectif de démontrer l'existence d'un courant proche de l'ethnographie qui, bien que discret, est néanmoins identifiable chez les trois acteurs principaux du domaine de l'anglais de spécialité dans l'enseignement supérieur, l'enseignant, l'apprenant et le chercheur. L'article conclut en avançant que l'ancrage socioculturel de l'enseignement et de la recherche de l'anglais de spécialité dans les universités françaises ne peut que s'enrichir à travers un plus grand rapprochement avec les principes et pratiques de l'ethnographie.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** anglais de spécialité, apprentissage de l'anglais de spécialité, didactique de l'anglais de spécialité, ethnographie, recherche en anglais de spécialité

**Keywords:** ESP, ethnography, ESP learner, ESP researcher, ESP teacher

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